

Pondicherry:

The last months before India's Independence

Perspectives of a British Consul General

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Perspectives of a British Consul General

The Imperial Strategy

June 3, 1947 was a day unlike any other. On this day, Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy called a Press Conference to announce that the British had decided to leave the Indian subcontinent by August 15 of the same year.

This momentous event would mark the end of 200 years of colonization of the *Jewel in the Crown*.

However, the British were not completely abandoning the sub-continent: the two Dominions of India and Pakistan would remain for some time in the Commonwealth. More than the Commonwealth membership, the British were interested to keep some strategic bases in the region. The recent work of C. Dasgupta, a former Indian diplomat has provided a new insight into this matter.¹ At the time of leaving South Asia, the British were not unhappy to see the sub-continent divided into two. For several reasons, their strategic interests clearly lay in Pakistan; the main rationale being that a few airbases in Pakistan were sufficient to keep a controlling presence in the region. And another reason was that Pakistan being a Muslim country, the proximity with its government opened new vistas for the British diplomacy with the oil-rich nations of the Middle East. Furthermore, Britain considered Pakistan a more dependable ally than India whose 'neutralist' principles greatly worried the Western powers.

The problem of the Jammu and Kashmir State would be a direct consequence of this imperial choice.

In this context it is not without interest to look at the British attitude towards the French settlements in India. We shall base our study on seven letters written by the British Consul General in Pondicherry around the time of the Independence of India and Pakistan.

¹ Dasgupta, C., *War and Diplomacy* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2002).

The Background

Col. E.W. Fletcher², the British Consulate General in Pondicherry regularly and minutely informed the Department of External Affairs of British India in Delhi of the latest developments in Pondicherry and the other four French settlements in India.

Through this correspondence we shall see the evolution of the political situation in French India from the point of view of a British officer. As this view is sometimes biased; we will occasionally balance it by taking a look at documents from the Indian and French Archives.

The First Letter³

The seven letters under study were sent between June 11, 1947 (barely eight days after the June 3 announcement) and September 17, 1947 (a month after Independence). They are of tremendous interest as the author was a personal witness to the last days of the British colonization of the sub-continent while at the same time one of the major informants for the soon-to-be independent Indian Ministry of External Affairs. As we shall see, the knowledge in Delhi of what was happening in Pondicherry was very restricted and without the input of the Consul General, the Indian position would have certainly been different.

The first letters were written from Conoor, a hill station in south Tamil Nadu where the Consul General was on 'recess'⁴. Despite the 'recess', we shall see that he was keeping himself busy.

All the letters were addressed to Major Atta-ul-Rahman, an Under Secretary to the Government of India in the Department of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations.⁵

² Edward Walter Fletcher (1899-1958); joined the Indian Political Service 1928; was the Consul General of Great Britain for French India between 1945 and August 1947.

³ The 7 letters from Col. E.W. Fletcher, Consul General of Great Britain in Pondicherry are available at the National Archives of India (File 26 (26)-X-47-MEA).

⁴ A British way of saying that he was escaping the heat of Pondicherry.

As soon as London had taken the decision to grant Independence to the sub-continent (and to partition it), the Viceroy in consultation with the interim government took several steps to prepare a draft of the Indian Independence Bill, based on the India Act of 1935.⁶

During the period between the announcement of the British Plan⁷ and August 15, an Interim Government took charge of the sub-continent's administration.

Portfolios were re-allocated: the Congress and the Muslim League in the Interim Cabinet took charge of the matters pertaining to their respective Dominions. The matters of common interest were being jointly dealt with by a Partition Committee (later called Partition Council) with an equal number of representatives from the Congress and the Muslim League. The Committee was chaired by Lord Mountbatten, the Viceroy.

Defense and External Affairs were to be jointly managed, but in fact were looked after by Mountbatten and London. The decisions of the Partition Council would have particularly serious consequences for the defense of each Dominion because though both the Dominions of India and Pakistan were supposed to be in control of their own forces with personnel respectively composed of non-Muslims and Muslims (at least in a predominant manner), British officers would remain at the helm of each army for several months. The conflict in Kashmir was partially a consequence of the continuing presence of two British Army Chiefs after this 'partition'.⁸

However the Foreign Affairs Office was exclusively the domain of the British, even though some Indian bureaucrats such as Sir Giralal Shankar Bajpai, the Secretary General, manned the Department.

⁵ This Department will become the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth on August 15.

⁶ On July 4, 1947, the Indian Independence Bill was introduced in the House of Commons by Prime Minister Attlee and the Bill was passed, without any amendment, by the House of Commons on 15 July. The following day the House of Lords approved it and it finally received the Royal Assent on 18 July.

⁷ On June 3, 1947.

⁸ See Arpi, Claude, *La Politique Francaise de Nehru – La fin des comptoirs francais en Inde (1947-1954)* (Auroville: Collection des Pavillons, 2002).

Pondicherry being a foreign territory was looked after by a Consul General⁹ posted in Pondicherry. Col. Fletcher had to report to Delhi. All his letters were marked “D.O.” or “Demi-Official” letters which means that there were internal communications within the British Administration.¹⁰

The interest of these letters lies in the ambiguous role played by Fletcher during those crucial weeks. As the British were leaving the boat, they were adamant that the French depart at the same time.

In this context, it is interesting to report an important meeting which was held a few days before June 3. The participants were Nehru, the future Prime Minister of free India, François Baron, the Governor of French India and Henri Roux, the French Chargé d’Affaires in Delhi.

This encounter should be seen in the proper perspective as it will be referred to several times in Fletcher’s letters. We shall use here the minutes of the meeting taken by Nehru’s Secretary¹¹. Henri Roux’s minutes¹² differ little except for the emphasis on certain points made by the French representative, which we shall return to.

Nehru first broached the questions of loges¹³: *“I discussed with the Governor the*

⁹ Col. Fletcher.

¹⁰ This form is used in correspondence between the Government officers for an interchange of communication of opinion or information without the formality of the prescribed procedure and also when it is desired that a matter should receive the personal attention of the individual addressed or when it is intended to bring to the personal notice of an officer a case in which action has been delayed and official reminders have failed to elicit reply.

A demi-official communication is addressed personally to an officer by name. It is written in the first person singular in a personal tone with the salutation 'My dear' or 'Dear' and terminating with 'Yours sincerely'. It is signed by the officer without mentioning his designation.

¹¹ Record of Nehru's interview with Mr. Baron, Governor of French India, and Mr. Henry-Paul Roux, French Chargé d’Affaires in India, at New Delhi on 27 May 1947, File No. 215-PS/46-PMS. Also in Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, Series II, Vol. 2, p. 571.

¹² The Chargé d’Affaires’ minutes are available in the French Diplomatic Archives.

¹³ Though Fletcher indicates much less, there were 12 loges occupying a total of 4 km² with 2,000 inhabitants. One of the problems of these loges —.located on the site of old factories with a free

question of the loges. He agreed that there should be a settlement about them soon and in fact that reference had been made to Paris. They were of no particular use to France and they had a certain nuisance value to the rest of India as they might be used for smuggling or other purposes.”

Hence, there was no real problem for the loges between Paris and Delhi. As promised by Baron, the loges would soon be ceded back to India.¹⁴

In the Indian minutes, the Customs Union Agreement¹⁵ is a separate topic taken up by Baron who assured the future Indian Prime Minister that *“there was no question of denunciation. They [Paris] wanted the agreement to continue, but they desired certain minor modifications.”* Nehru retorted that he *“would gladly discuss minor modifications but we thought that nothing should be done to weaken the administration and thereby possibly to enable a revival of smuggling”*. Baron agreed to this¹⁶.

Then the main topic was brought by Baron. The scheme suggested to solve the question of the French Settlements in India was that France should establish in

port status — was that the French Administration (as well as the British) sometimes did not know where they were located or their exact use (except, of course smuggling).

The situation became more ridiculous when in a magnanimous gesture the French Government ceded these parcels of French territory, in contradiction to the French Constitution which stipulates that for the cession of any territory, it is necessary to have the agreement of the concerned population and the assent of the Parliament. Some of these loges, had only one inhabitant (a *‘concierge’*) and it would have been the first referendum organised for only one voter! The worst was that by mistake (or ignorance), France offered all these loges to India, including a few located in Eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh). To date no complaint has been lodged by either the Pakistani or Bangladeshi authorities!

¹⁴ Roux mentions in his minutes: *“Governor Baron and myself promised to support this demand, but we insisted in return on the necessity to revise the customs convention in force in the French Establishments since the war.”*

¹⁵ French India entered into a customs union with British India in 1941 whereby all goods exported from or imported into the ports of Pondicherry and Karaikal became liable to the same duties as those levied in British Indian ports.

¹⁶ Baron was reprimanded by his own Gouvernement for having discussed the matter without a proper brief.

Pondicherry an important international university based on French culture. The French Governor's view was that France should keep a 'cultural' foothold in Pondicherry through an educational institution where French culture will be taught.

The minutes inform us that: *"The Governor spoke about the French Government's desire to develop cultural institutions in Pondicherry and a kind of a university. The idea was that this university should serve India by bringing French culture to the [local] French. He added that the French Government wanted to know our reactions to this before they started on this scheme."*

It appears that Nehru was not against the French proposal to set up a university. Later, a lot of waves were created by the British, who were not keen to see any type of French influence, even cultural, remain in India.

A first confirmation of the British attitude came after a meeting Nehru had with Field Marshal Montgomery who mentioned *"Monsieur Baron's 'strange' proposal that France should continue to exercise some sort of cultural control in the French colonies.¹⁷"* His remark had come after Nehru alluded in the meeting with the Field Marshall that the French and the Portuguese colonies in India would inevitably merge into the Indian Union sooner or later. We shall repeatedly see that the British were not ready to accept this cultural foothold. Montgomery's purpose in meeting Nehru was probably to put doubts in his mind.

Regarding the meeting between Nehru, Baron and Roux, the latter's 'very confidential' report to Paris states: *"The head of the Indian Government seemed inclined to welcome with sympathy this effort of our two countries coming closer intellectually. We have, Nehru said, despite our political [independence] struggle, looked at the world with British glasses. We will continue in a way to remain influenced by the British culture and to speak English, the importance of this language cannot be set aside. But we wish to know other languages and we are interested by other cultures. We have a strong intellectual sympathy for your country and we know that we have a lot to learn from you. It means that we shall*

¹⁷ SWJN, Series II, Vol. 3, Interviews with Field Marshal Lord Montgomery, 23 & 24 June 1947, p. 300.

be happy to find in Pondicherry, without going far way [to France], an open window on France and facilities for our youth to get more familiar with your language, your culture and your civilization.” After the meeting, the matter was left at that.

The discussion continued and Baron elaborated on the political developments in India *“which would inevitably affect Pondicherry”*. He explained to Nehru that *“in Pondicherry there were two sentiments; the sentiment of India as a motherland to which they were attracted, and another sentiment of attachment to France as a result of many hundreds of years of union with France and French culture. While there was a desire for union with India, there was also a desire to continue this cultural attachment with France.”*

Baron’s solution for this dichotomy was that Pondicherry and the other French Establishments could become parts of the Union of Free India while keeping a kind of dual nationality for the population. In Baron’s words: *“They might be both citizens of the Indian Union and for some purposes citizens of France.”*

Regarding the first assertion of Baron, Nehru not only agreed to it, but he also said that he would never take over the French territories by force or compulsion. The future showed that this principle would be applied scrupulously. The interim Prime Minister remarked: *“I appreciated what he [Baron] had said about the dual sentiment among the people of Pondicherry. So far as we were concerned we naturally wanted a united India without any foreign bases or extra-territorial rights. We would like French possessions in India to be absorbed in the India Union, not by compulsion but because we felt that the people there would naturally desire this to be done. We would like this to be left to the decision of the people.”*

Nehru was not very warm about the dual citizenship proposed by Baron. Once more it has to be pointed out that the French Governor was sounding out the future Indian Prime Minister without any prior reference to his own government, particularly his own ministry. Nehru told him:

The other proposal about a dual nationality was a novel one which required full examination as to how far it was practicable. We would certainly like

Pondicherry with its long past of French culture to continue its cultural attachment to France. Possibly some means would be devised to maintain this or some similar connection, which would not come in the way of Pondicherry being a full member of the Indian Union.

The fourth point in the discussion is rather strange and led to a lot of misunderstanding. We shall see that it was artfully used by the British Consul-General to discredit Baron, when in fact the concept was put forth by Nehru: *“I further pointed out that a free India would be a federation of autonomous units. It was possible that even within a federating unit there might be smaller autonomous areas forming cultural or linguistic units. While we desired to maintain the unity of India and a strong Central Government, we were anxious not to come in the way of the variety of India and the cultural autonomy of its different regions.”*

The ‘federation of autonomous units’ spoken about by Nehru, it was clearly a very dangerous concept for India.¹⁸ Most of Nehru’s colleagues certainly could not agree with it as a more centralised grouping was envisaged. However, the French Foreign Ministry as well as the Ministry of Overseas Territories worked during the following months in this direction.¹⁹

In his minutes, Roux said that: *“Nehru did not dismiss the possibility of an*

¹⁸ Of course, India never took this direction in view of the dangers of this proposal which would have ended up in the balkanisation of the Indian Union. One can imagine that some small princely States (and even the larger ones such as Jammu & Kashmir or Hyderabad) would have been delighted to become ‘autonomous entities’ within the Indian Republic. It was certainly not the vision of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Deputy Prime Minister who was the Minister responsible for the Princely States. There is no doubt that this autonomy would have led to an unmanageable federation.

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The second part of the proposal (a strong Central State) was implemented.

In this sense, one can understand that the Government of India never accepted the principle of the condominium, which was however studied in detail in Paris for several years.

¹⁹ A sort of autonomous status for the French Establishments (status of free-city) eventually forming a condominium between the French Union and the Indian Dominion.

autonomous community of French India which will be associated with the French Union while remaining part of the Indian Federation... Such a solution would need, of course to be studied carefully."

The conclusion of Nehru was: *"On the whole Mon[sieur]. Barron agreed with what I said. I reminded him of what he had stated on a previous occasion about the people of Pondicherry being free to join the Union of India if they so chose."*

Just as his French interlocutors were leaving, Nehru broached a topic close to his heart: Indo-China. He told Roux about the *"strong feeling in India in regard to the conflict going on in Indo-China."*

It is important to mention Nehru's view on the subject because the conflict in the Indochinese peninsula had serious bearings on France's decision to cede the French settlements in India. Nehru explained to Roux and Baron: *"It was natural not only for Indians but for the people of other parts of Asia to dislike intensely the activities of a foreign Power to suppress the people of a colonial territory. Mon[sieur]. Roux said that he realised that there were these reactions. The whole affair was a deplorable one and he hoped that an armistice leading to some settlement would come soon. He pointed out that the Vietminh was only one part of Indo-China. I said that we were not concerned with any one party, but with the fact that the people of India-China should be left free to decide their own fate."*

Of course, Nehru's statement that he was not concerned 'with any one party' was incorrect. During the following years, he would defend Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh cause in all international forums. There was a great proximity of thought between Indian leaders who had fought against a colonial power and their Vietnamese brethren.

One of the conclusions of the French Chargé d'Affaire was that *"the Indian Government considers that the problem of French India can be solved amicably and is convinced that time will play in favour of such solution"*.

The question of the French Establishments in India was complicated by the fact that the matter was dealt with by two French ministries²⁰. The pulling and the frictions between the two ministries translated into difficult relations between

²⁰ Foreign Affairs and Overseas Territories.

Baron and Roux. Though their positions were quite similar on the final possible outcome, their way of functioning was different and there was probably a personal rivalry between them.

On July 5, in a personal letter addressed to an Ambassador colleague, Roux wrote that Baron looked very worried after he had received criticism following the meeting with Nehru. The diplomat adds: *“You are informing me that he is not very much in favour. I am not particularly surprised. He is a person who is intelligent and charismatic, but lacks consistency and clarity [consistence et netteté]. He is marked with the Indian sign, as many others of our countrymen. This land holds a considerable attraction on the people whose character is not at the level of their intellect or their sensibility. This country weakens [amollit], it irritates, it intoxicates certain persons. Having said that, I think it would be wrong to replace Baron at this point in time, it would provoke a lot of suspicion.”*

The Chargé’s solution for French India did not differ much from the Governor’s. The only real disagreement was between their respective ministries.

From the first day, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs knew that there was no other choice for France but to leave²¹, while the Overseas Ministry did not want to let go of the Establishments as it would create a precedent for the other French colonies. One can understand that an Overseas Ministry with no colonies, no longer has a raison-d’être.

This first encounter between the Prime Minister of the soon-independent India and the French representatives is important not only because it sets the tone for future relations but also because the first letter under study constantly refers to this meeting. The timing of the meeting is also important: it was held exactly a week before the announcement of the 3 June Plan and Fletcher’s first letter is written only a week after this date.

Before going through the details of Fletcher’s secret letters, it is interesting to note that at this very crucial time for India and Pondicherry, the Consul General was ‘on recess’. No doubt Pondicherry is very hot in June and though the British were usually remarkably organized at transferring their administration to higher

²¹ Before getting a ‘kick in the ass’ once wrote the Archbishop of Pondicherry.

altitudes wherever the weather became too scorching in the plains, in view of the tense (and exceptional) situation, one would have thought that the Consul General would have remained in his hot seat.

Another point has to be made: it is rather surprising that Governor Baron confided such details to the Crown's Representative. Let us not forget that Fletcher was not only working for an occupying power (like Baron), but also for the occupied. The ambivalence of his position was perhaps not fully grasped by the French Governor. Fletcher's letters are all addressed to an officer of the Government of India, geared to assume control of the affairs of the sub-continent. Another possibility is that Baron was using this opportunity to send 'messages' to Delhi. Whatever the reasons for Baron's confidences, we shall see that they were faithfully and diligently reported to Delhi. For us, they make interesting and informative reading.

In the first letter, Fletcher informs Atta-ul-Rahman that he had a long conversation with Baron on the previous day during which the Governor read some extracts of a letter addressed to his boss in Paris, the Secretary in the French Overseas Ministry.

According to Fletcher, Baron pointed out to Paris that, *"it is impossible for France to keep French India in the French Union unless it becomes autonomous, for its continued existence must depend on the friendly toleration of the future Governments of Hindustan and Pakistan."*

Most of the diplomats at that time envisaged a comparable position for Hindustan (India) and Pakistan, though the future would show that Pakistan was not interested to play any role in Pondicherry. Theoretically (as in the case of Junagadh), the Prince or the Legislative Assembly of a State could join the Dominion of its choice: the main principles which governed the merger (with one of two dominions) was the decision of the Prince (or the Assembly) and the contiguity with one of the Dominions. In this sense, Pondicherry had nothing in common with Pakistan.

Fletcher tells us that Baron made the following request to his ministry: *"Autonomy must be granted within three months and preferably by August 15th."* The

Governor also wanted the French Government to support him fully in the reform process; if not, *“he wished to be relieved as soon as possible by a governor armed with wide powers”*.

It is not clear what motivated Baron's request, however his position was probably difficult considering the divergent views between the two ministries on one hand and the uncertainty of the policies of the future Government of India on the other (without mentioning the fluctuating stand of the local Pondicherian politicians).

Then came a very important part of Fletcher's letter quoting Baron who *“envisaged the future fragmentation of India”*. The Governor particularly refers to *“the probability of splits within the ranks of the Congress.”*

This argument will come again and again in Fletcher's letters.

Baron also mentioned his grand project *“of making Pondicherry a university town for the spread of French culture”*. He informed Paris that he had got the agreement for this from the Government of India while he was in Delhi.

According to Fletcher, Baron said that the Indian officials told him that *“so far the only foreign culture which India had known was the Anglo-Saxon”* and India would welcome *“having a window open on France and its culture”*.

We already saw that this corresponds exactly to the report sent by Roux to Paris. This point is not fully confirmed by Nehru's minutes of the 27 May meeting, but neither is it denied.

Baron's letter is said to have ended by an argument which made sense to Paris. As the British were leaving India, the population of erstwhile British India would remain in one of the two Dominions of Hindustan and Pakistan which in turn would be part of the British Commonwealth. Baron's point was that the French Settlements should remain *“within the French Union rather than join a Dominion of the British Commonwealth”*. At the same time, they should be granted an internal autonomy. For Baron – provided they had complete local autonomy – the local population would certainly prefer to remain in the French Union rather than the British Commonwealth. He added that the idea to join the Commonwealth, made the population of French India “perplexed”.

Was Baron aware that his communications were immediately sent to the interim Indian government? Was he passing on this information on purpose to put pressure on Paris? It is difficult to say, though he could not have ignored that Fletcher could report to Delhi.

The British Consul General continued his detailed report to his Delhi contacts. Though Baron may have been carried away at certain times (which was not unusual for him), the following paragraphs of the letter tend to show that he wanted to send a message to Delhi.

He mentioned his visit to Delhi to Fletcher about and repeated what he had told Nehru about the loges: *“He was recommending to the French Government that they should at once abandon all claims to the ‘loges’ as a ‘generous gesture’.* He added that *“it should be done at once, but he feared that French insistence on legal formalities might delay matters for as much as a year. The Ministry of the Colonies might adopt the view that to give up the ‘loges’ was a cession of sovereignty which would entail a reference to the French parliament and the enactment of special legislation.”*

In this case, the fact that he reiterated what he had said in Delhi was a roundabout way of sending a message to Delhi. Baron impressed on the French Government that it should at once abandon its claims on *“the loges which were of no material value to France.”*

He insisted that he wanted *“to give French India a status equivalent to that of the Dominions of Hindustan and Pakistan”* According to him, it was imperative. The fact that the Congress and Muslim League had temporarily accepted the Dominion status gave a “breathing space” to France, which for Baron could allow the French government to put a new set up in place in the Establishments. Fletcher tells us that Baron always considered Chandernagore as a lost case. Even when Maurice Schumann visited the Bengali Settlement, he immediately understood that little could be done for stop the city from ‘merging’ with India. Years later, he recalled:

When I reached Chandernagore, I found myself in a absolutely untenable situation. Try to imagine that you are driving through Porte d’Auteuil and

that you enter Boulogne, that you see the Indian flag and someone tells you: "You are on the Indian territory, there is here a deputy who is sitting in the Assembly in Calcutta. More than Pondicherry which was a [geographical] entity, Chandernagore appeared to be a geographical (or historical) scam. It was indeed a city in an industrial suburb. But I have to immediately add that at that time, India was a thorn; what was called by a delightful euphemism 'communal struggles' – it was the second very regrettable and even dramatic factor for the success of my mission – India was devastated by the massacres... In India, everything goes multiplies by 10, by 100 or by 1000. The sight of Calcutta was horrible: taxi drivers were Muslims and on the eve of my arrival, near each taxi there was a Muslim with his throat cut. I do not even speak about the poverty and the misery: I was coming from Europe which had not come out of the disastrous consequences of the war, but which seemed to swim in opulence compared to the sight of Independent India.

However, in June 1947, Baron still believed that if his plan was implemented *in toto*, perhaps Chandernagore could be 'saved'. Mahé, on the Malabar coast was another difficult case for the French administration.

Fletcher writes that the conclusion of Baron after his visit to Delhi was that *"the Indian leaders he had met were not in any hurry to deal with the problem of French India but would leave it until they had settled the numerous and more important problems confronting them."*

It was quite a correct assessment. During the following months and years, the French government, especially the Overseas Ministry will play with this argument. Even Paul Ramadier, the French Prime Minister (*Président du Conseil*) sent Maurice Schumann to India with a one-point mission, to delay (or least to give the time to make it constitutionally legal) the fateful end which was known to all.

Baron explained in detail his difficulties with the French Administration to Fletcher who reports: *"the truth of the situation now boils down to a tussle between him and reactionary elements in the Ministry of the Colonies."*

It seems clear that in this case Baron, a free-lancer, was passing on the information to the British Consul knowing full well that it would be reported to Delhi which would thus be assured of his sincerity. Baron had sometimes a Gaullian²² attitude: “*After me, the deluge*”. Was he serious in his threats that if his views did not prevail²³, he would resign with gloomy consequences for Pondicherry and the other settlements? Indeed, he knew fairly well that Settlements such as Chandernagore would survive more than a few weeks without these conditions.

But his bosses in Paris were “*not enamoured of the idea as they fear that it may create an awkward precedent for other parts of the French Empire [for example Madagascar] – where the French are faced with nationalist agitation.*”

Fletcher’s opinion was: as Baron believed that India was likely to be “*further divided after the departure of the British*”, the French were ‘gambling’ on the fact that the Governments of Pakistan and Hindustan would be too busy with internal troubles to be bothered about French India. In these circumstances, they would have no time to encourage the nationalist aspirations in the French Territories. The future proved that this assertion was not totally correct: despite the communal riots in North India and the inter-dominion problems²⁴, India kept a strong pressure on Pondicherry during the following years.

It is not clear what Baron meant by ‘India’s further divisions’, but in June 1947 very few expected Sardar Patel and V.P. Menon to perform the feat of integrating more than 500 Princely States within the new Dominion in just two months. In fact, the only State which was not fully integrated was Kashmir, and this was mainly due to British interference and the blunders of Nehru who took the Kashmir files away from Patel.

We have briefly mentioned the ‘university’ scheme presented by Baron to Nehru during their meeting in Delhi. We also saw the adverse reaction of Field Marshal Montgomery who went to complain about it to the Indian Prime Minister.

²² Governor Baron had closely collaborated with General de Gaulle during World War II.

²³ Complete local autonomy and Dominion status within the French Union.

²⁴ Such as Kashmir and Junagadh.

In his report to Delhi, Fletcher points out to the Ministry of External Affairs: *“the intention of the French to make Pondicherry a university town and a centre of French culture while keeping it within the French Union and separate from independent India.”*

The British Consul General saw the scheme as a French plot to remain on the sub-continent. Making a connection with Baron’s remarks about a possible fragmentation of India after independence, Fletcher believed that *“the French may cherish hopes of being able to derive benefits other than purely cultural ones.”* He further commented: *“It is not necessary for the spread of French culture to keep a part of India within the French Union. The establishment of French cultural and educational institutions in cooperation with the Governments of Hindustan and Pakistan in such centres as Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi and Madras would seem to be a more efficacious way of doing this than the creation of a ‘cité universitaire’ [university campus] in an insignificant and comparatively remote place like Pondicherry.”*

Though he admitted that *“the French are only actuated by ‘amour propre’ and the desire to establish a cultural centre which will attract the best intellects of India”*, he still saw a great danger²⁵ in the scheme.

We have pointed out in another paper²⁶, that this idea originated from Sri Aurobindo who saw the importance of the presence of French thought, art and culture remaining in Pondicherry for India.

But the British could only envision the political aspect of the problem. Perhaps their ‘amour-propre’ dictated that all other cultures should leave the sub-continent at the same time. Fletcher’s argument was that the Communists were still very strong in France and that there was some possibility of the Party coming to power: *“Were this to happen, a French cultural and educational centre in a part of India outside the jurisdiction of any Indian Government might be embarrassing.”* He pointed out that French India was very much economically dependant on India and that *“it would ever be very difficult to detach it from France by economic*

²⁵ For Great Britain or for India?

²⁶ *La Revue d’Auroville*,

measures.” This is in fact what happened a few years later when an economic blockade was organised by Delhi to put pressure on the French Administration to accept the ‘merger’.

Fletcher’s conclusion was that the ‘mass of the population’ of French India was inclined “to join their brothers in India”, rather than remain under the aegis of a foreign power. It is rather surprising that the Representative of a foreign power which ruled India for two centuries uttered these words! It sounds as if Fletcher was the representative of the Indian State. In fact he uses the same arguments as the Communists.

He also hammered Rahman about the Communist threat, arguing that if local autonomy was granted by the French government, the local politicians, mostly Communist would not be able to provide an efficient or honest administration to the French territories. The Communist threat was a serious one as this Party was the largest in the Assembly of French India and “*this may prove embarrassing to the Madras and Bengal Governments.*”

Finally, Fletcher requested Delhi to be informed of the view of the Government of India on the future of the French Settlements. He was also interested to know the details of the talks between Baron and the Indian officials in Delhi. He probably did not believe Baron’s account of the meeting.

What is of great interest in this letter (as well as in the following) is that it very accurately sets the stage of the last few weeks of the British Raj. It shows the forces in presence a few weeks before the independence of dominions of India and Pakistan. The views of Fletcher are his own, but one can perceive the British interests at the time of Mountbatten’s announcement.²⁷ These are very precious documents in this historical context.

It is clear that if the British were compelled to leave India (for whatever historic or political reasons), they were not ready to accept that another colonial power, particularly the French would remain in India after their departure. This can be seen by the rather disproportionate reaction of the Consul General vis-à-vis the

²⁷ June 3 Plan and the announcement of the date of the departure from the British of the sub-continent.

University scheme.²⁸ The bringing up of the Communist threat also shows the way Fletcher tried to influence the Indian administration and instill fear into the Indian officials in Delhi. Though it has to be noted that Nehru never believed in the Communist threat, the best proof is that Subbiah, the Communist leader (and French Senator) met Nehru²⁹ on August 13, less than two days before independence.³⁰ He advocated the complete merger of the French Settlements with India. A newspaper reported: *“Pandit Nehru expressed his complete sympathy with the movement that was going on in different parts of French India. Questioned whether he [Subbiah] had agreed to the French Government staying on in India for the purpose of establishment of cultural relations between France and India, he explained that he had only expressed his desire to have cultural relations with France, but would never tolerate political domination of the French over any section of the people in India.”*

The Communists in French India were violently against the reforms proposed by Baron. The fact that the Indian Prime Minister took the time to receive the Communist leader in spite of more pressing problems to resolve, proves that the Indian Government was expecting some support from the majority Party in Pondicherry in favour of the merger.

Second Letter

²⁸ Fletcher’s reaction will later be quoted by Nehru.

²⁹ Interview with K.V.Subbiah at New Delhi. From *The Leader*, 21 August 1947.

Biographic Note: K.V.Subbiah (b.1911) was a member of the Congress Party, Pondicherry (1930-1942); he launched the Communist Party of French India in September 1942; was a member of the Communist Party of India from 1942; a member of the French Parliament for Pondicherry (1946-1948); Secretary of the Communist Party, Tamil Nadu (1952-54) and the Minister of Agriculture, Pondicherry (1969-73).

³⁰ Subbiah mentioned in his memoirs that the Office of the Prime Minister denied the existence of the meeting through a press statement. Subbiah added: *“It was a fact that the said interview was not fixed officially and did not take place in the Prime Minister’s Office. But it happened at the Prime Minister’s residence arranged by his Personal Secretary Mr. Mathai.”* After the law and order problems caused by the Communists, Nehru probably realised that the meeting could be misinterpreted.

The second letter under study is dated July 1, 1947, three weeks after the first one. It was again written from Coonor where Fletcher was still 'recessing'. Francois Baron, the Governor of French India had just arrived in Wellington to spend a fortnight. He must have also suffered from the Pondicherry heat. It is quite surprising that at this crucial juncture, both the French Governor and the British Consul were not in their seat. They were 'recessing' in a hill station. We should not forget that there were only 45 days to go before the independence of India and Pakistan and that tensions were building up in the subcontinent. Baron, unfortunately for him, would not have Fletcher's luck: a day after his arrival he received (in the presence of the British Consul) a telegram requesting him to fly immediately to Paris.

The assessment conveyed by Fletcher about the threat of the Communists three weeks earlier, appeared now not totally unfounded. According to the Consul General, Baron was *"considerably worried by the fact that the Communists have decided to make common cause with the Congress and agitate for independence or, rather, union with the Indian Union."*

For the Governor, this was shocking: *"how they could give up the advantages of being within the French Union in order to join the Indian Union where they will be dominated by the Congress"*. He was unable to understand the stand of pro-merger politicians.

The comment of Fletcher rings true: *"political labels mean little to the ordinary man in Pondicherry"*. This would be proven time and again during the following years, particularly with the Socialist leader Édouard Goubert, who would change party and stand whenever convenient or more lucrative. But the conclusion of Fletcher was different: *"the sentiments of kinship with India are far stronger than political party ties."* According to the British Consul, the reasoning of the Communists was that in the long run they could become stronger than the Congress in South India, and therefore dictate their own terms.

Baron also shared his thoughts that once in Paris, he would be able to convince his ministry to grant French India the status of a Dominion within the French Union. For the Governor, nothing short of this solution could work. Stuck between

the Communists asking for an immediate merger and a conservative ministry, Baron believed that a few concessions mid-way to the 'mergerist' demands would not help to find a permanent solution, as the use of force was ruled out to solve the issue.

In his discussion with Fletcher, Baron mentioned that Bazin, the Administrator of Chandernagore had come to Pondicherry and informed him that he was extremely worried about the future of the Bengali settlement. He believed that after India's independence, the position of the French colony in Bengal would be untenable. He even thought that his life would be in danger. According to Fletcher's information, Bazin was agreeable to remain as Adviser to an Indian Administrator but he had little hopes of remaining the French Administrator of Chandernagore.

Fletcher was of the opinion (and it probably reflects London's views) that "*unless the French Government make some kind of move before the 15th August there will be considerable agitation throughout French India, especially in Mahé and Chandernagore*". He also felt that the French might have to use force to control the law and order.³¹

Baron himself was very worried about the flare-up of serious troubles in Chandernagore. His great apprehension was that the surrounding districts in Bengal would join a movement "*to liberate their brothers from French Imperialism*".

Another concern was the constant political crisis in Paris. Due to the instability of the successive French governments which often did not last more than a few months, it seemed difficult for Paris³² to take a sweeping decision which alone could save the situation.

Baron told Fletcher that his hopes rested on the people of French India and the Government of the Indian Union accepting some sort of dual citizenship for the inhabitants of the settlements. Though Baron told Bazin that Nehru and Mahatma

³¹ According to the Treaty signed 1814 between France and Great Britain, France was not allowed to keep armed forces in Pondicherry.

³² Particularly with two ministries involved.

Gandhi were open to this idea, we have seen in Nehru's minutes of the meeting that it was not so.

Regarding the proposed university, Fletcher had received reports from Pondicherry that "*the idea of creating a French cultural centre there has aroused no enthusiasm*". It is true that traditionally culture had never enthused Pondicherian politicians.

Baron informed Fletcher that Subbiah had left France on the June 27 by the French steamer "Chantilly".³³ The Senator was due to reach Pondicherry between July 15 and 20. The Governor was not very happy that the French Government had allowed him to leave on a French ship. Baron knew that the Communist Senator was not going to support French interests. His hope was that Subbiah would be arrested by the Madras Government before reaching Pondicherry.

Fletcher was in two minds: was Baron giving him a true picture of the situation or was he still hoping to persuade Subbiah and the Communists to choose in favour of the French Union? The British Consul reiterated his fears that if France would grant local autonomy to the Establishments, they would decide to stay within the French Union, it would be very embarrassing for Independent India to have a Communist base on its territory.

On June 26, in an internal Note³⁴, Nehru reacted to Fletcher's alleged comment by Baron that India would split in pieces after the British departure from the sub-continent.³⁵ In this connection, he reiterated the importance of having proper diplomatic ties with Paris: "*Of course we should send a Chargé to Paris as soon*

³³ Subbiah could only travel by ship as there was a warrant of arrest pending against him in Madras province for his trade union activities.

³⁴ Note, 27 June 1947. External Affairs Department File No.26(26)-X/47, pp. 6-7/n, National Archives of India.

³⁵ Sir Giralal Shankar Bajpai, in his note of 26 June 1947, had drawn Nehru's attention to the conversation quoted earlier between the French Governor and the British Consul General in which the former was of the view that India was likely to be further divided after the British departure. Bajpai suggested the need to have at least a Chargé d'Affaires in Paris to correct such mischievous information.

as possible for a number of reasons. The fate of French India is, however ultimately going to be decided in India or rather by developments in India. M. Baron agreed with me that it was inevitable that Pondicherry should and must join the Indian Union. There was no other alternative.”

Nehru did not give much credit to Fletcher’s argument that the university scheme was a French trick to keep a stronghold in India after India’s independence. He wrote: *“What he [Baron] pressed for, was some cultural privileges for France there. I had no objection to this (if they could be arranged) provided politically French India was absorbed into the Indian Union. Col. Fletcher need not therefore be afraid of Pondicherry becoming the base of a foreign power.”*

Regarding the proposed autonomy, Nehru believed that many things would come into place after the departure of the British: *“I think it is highly likely that soon after August 1947 the Government of India will put forward formal proposals in regard to French and Portuguese India. These must inevitably mean the absorption of these areas into India. At the most they might involve some kind of popular referendum. Col. Fletcher and Mr. Baig might well prepare the ground for this. The fact that Pondicherry might get some kind of self-government is not likely to make much difference.”*

The fact that the British Consul General was expected to “prepare the ground” for the departure of the French, is not without irony. The following letters will show that he well fulfilled his duty towards the Government of India.

Third Letter

This letter dated July 4, 1947, also refers to the secret communication of Major Atta-ur-Rahman of June 4, 1947. Though we are not aware of the content of this letter, it was probably informing the British Consul of the June 3 Plan and asking for more information on the functioning of the administration of French India. As Fletcher was still ‘on recess’, he did not possess all the requested information. However he offered the officials of the Department of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations an ‘outline of the French administration”.

Here are the details of the functioning of French India, which make interesting reading to understand the situation of the Establishments in 1947.

The governor is the head of the administration, is appointed by the Ministry of the Colonies [Overseas Territory] and has wide powers. He has his own secretariat run by a gazetted French official known as the Chef de Cabinet. Since Baron came, a private secretary, who is a junior gazetted officer, has been added. He combines the duties of an A.D.C. and confidential secretary. The Government-Secretariat proper is divided into two main departments: the Premier Bureau, which deals with finance and connected matters and the Deuxième Bureau, which deals with administrative matters. Then there are the other departments such as Treasury, which corresponds direct with the Ministry of Finance in Paris – a fact productive of no little friction, Public Works Department, Department of Education – directly under the Governor, Force Publiques or Armed Forces – comprising the police and the armed gendarmerie, Judicial Department – directly responsible to the Ministry of Justice in Paris, Revenue Department, Department of Health and the Postal Department. A feature of the administration which is worth noting is that the executive and the judiciary are entirely separated; this also sometimes, leads to friction.

Then the administrative set up of the four other settlements (Mahé on the Malabar coast, Yanaon in today Andhra Pradesh, Chandernagore in Bengal and Karikal, south of Pondicherry) is explained.

In the other four settlements the administration is run by administrators, who should be, but are not always, gazetted officers of the Colonial Service. Their duties approximate to those of Collectors in British Indian districts, except that they have no judicial powers. Sometimes they are made honorary magistrates when there are not enough magistrates to go round – there should be one magistrate in each settlement. They supervise the work of the branches of the other departments in their districts, but the subordinate heads of the other departments correspond ordinarily direct with their headquarters in Pondicherry. Labour matters are dealt with by an

Inspector of Labour, whose headquarters are in Pondicherry and who is a gazetted French official.

The administrators are in charge of labour matters in their areas and are also usually directly in charge of education. The system seems elastic and the duties of the administrators vary somewhat as sometimes the departments have not got enough officials for their subordinate offices and the Administrator takes charge.

[Then follows a description of the security forces based in the Settlements:] The Armed forces were originally divided into the civil police and the armed gendarmerie, who were under the War Ministry. In 1941 they were amalgamated under a military officer under the Ministry of War. Under him are two French subalterns, one in charge of the civil police and one commanding the gendarmerie. Police posts are maintained in all the settlements. There are a number of French NCOs³⁶ whose number has lately been reduced.

Brief information on the judicial system is also given.

In each settlement there is a criminal court and usually a civil court. In Pondicherry are civil and criminal courts superior to them and a Court of Appeal, from whose decisions' appeals lie to Paris.

Finally, the status of the several loges is described. The existence of the tiny parcels of French territories on Indian (and Pakistani) soil must have been a very nebulous affair for the officials of the Department of External Affairs in Delhi. For Great Britain itself it was not a crucial issue as the Consul General of His Gracious Majesty had never been directed to visit the loges for the two years he was posted in Pondicherry. Fletcher commented:

As regards the loges, I have not personally visited them as I did not wish to do anything which might have raised this vexed question until the

³⁶ Non-Commissioned Officers.

Government of India were ready to do so. From the voluminous files in the Consulate it appears that there are eight³⁷ only viz,

Calicut

Masulipatam

Balasore

Patna

Surat

Dacca

Kasim Bazar

Jugdea

A short description of each loge follows:

Of the above Surat consist of two pieces of land and there is a French enclave named Geretti near Chandernagore but this, I believe, is recognized as part of Chandernagore. I am verifying this. Of the other Jugdea is under the sea and Patna has never been found. Dacca also consists of two pieces of land. The French maintain a police post, or rather shed, at Masulipatam and it appears that criminal matters are dealt with by the police who arrive first on the scene!! It is under the Administrator of Yanam and the Governor tells me that the Administrator visited it recently and was received with acclaim and a display of French bunting by the inhabitants. The serving of civil summons has led to endless squabbles in the past. There is apparently a French flagstaff and a minor French employee, known officially as the French Agent, but referred to by the Governor as the 'concierge'. At Calicut there is a similar "concierge". I do not know if there are any police at Calicut and I am finding out: at Masulipatam there is usually one but I believe occasionally there are two. Calicut is dealt with by the Administrator of Mahé and Surat appears to be nominally under

³⁷ In fact, they were 12 loges/factories. Many of them were in East Pakistan: for example the factories of Dacca, Jugdea, Chittagong and Sylhiet as well as the loges in Serampour et Sola. A French researcher recently prepared a thesis on the subject. He claims that these territories are legally still French territories. But some might be impossible to locate.

the jurisdiction of the French Consul, Bombay. By mutual arrangement no taxes or revenue are collected in Calicut or Masulipatam by either the Government of India or the French Government. This was arranged pending the settlement of the question of jurisdiction about which negotiations were in progress just before the outbreak of war. Balasore is leased by the Government of India. No jurisdiction appears to be exercised by the French in Surat. In Dacca the French do not appear to have exercised any jurisdiction for over a hundred years. In Kasim Bazar the French have not exercised any jurisdiction.

The most important of these loges were apparently the ones near Calicut and Masulipatam. Fletcher provided some more details:

The Calicut and Masulipatam loges have given most trouble and the whole story is in the Draft Brief prepared by the Government of Madras in 1938 entitled "The loges at Masulipatam and Calicut and the Iskitippah Islands", a copy of which must certainly be in your office. Savidge, when Under Secretary, visited Masulipatam in January or February 1940 and wrote a note which is, I think, on your records. This brings me to the Iskitippah Islands and first of all I think it should be realized that they are only sand-banks, which often change their position, are frequently covered by water, and have no value. I believe that some scrub jungle grows on some of these. The Administrator of Yanam who told me about them and considered them absolutely worthless. They are uninhabited.

At the end of his letter, the British Consul offered to visit some of the loges, at least Calicut, which was not too far from the place of his recess.

I hope that this may be of some use. If you think it worthwhile I could visit all these loges and perhaps you will let me know if you wish me to do so. It hardly seems worth the expense to Government. I propose any way to visit Calicut soon from Mahé, as it is not far from here.

This gave the Indian bureaucrats a fairly good idea about the status of the loges, though their precise location was more difficult to find out. A few days

later, a more detailed note was sent to Delhi on the same subject. We shall not quote from it as it is more technical.

Finally Fletcher apologized 'for the bad typing': he had to type the official letters; he added that he was also having trouble with his type-writer. This remark is rather surprising, when one thinks that barely 40 days remained for the British to leave the sub-continent, but the Consul General was far away from his duties with no staff and practically no access to information. This image perhaps symbolises the end of 200 years of British rule in India. In any case, it shows how little interest the British had for the French settlements though they were extremely worried that the French should not overstay after they had left. This letter also demonstrates the poor (not to say inexistent) knowledge, in the Government of India about the situation (as well as the administrative set-up) of French India.

It has nevertheless to be noted that Nehru was aware of the problem of the loges, though probably not in detail. On April 23³⁸, he had sent a reply to the Department of Foreign Affairs which had asked the authorisation to suggest to the French Charge d'Affaires informally that *"the French claims in loges in India, had no justification in existing conditions and a voluntary surrender of these claims would contribute greatly to friendly relations between the two countries."* This suggestion was made after the Orissa Government proposed that the French loge in the district of Balasore which created administrative problems should be incorporated in the province of Orissa. Nehru had answered: *"I agree. The matter should be raised unofficially as suggested. It need not, however, be said that we do not intend to raise it officially. We shall wait for the outcome of the unofficial approach before deciding upon our future course of action. For the present only the loges should be discussed."*³⁹

³⁸ Note, 23 April 1947. External Affairs Department File No.26 (18)-X/47, p..8/notes, National Archives of India. See also SWJN, Series II, Vol. 2, p. 571.

³⁹ Negotiations for the cession of these territories to India were initiated in 1945, without any appreciable progress.

It was left at that till the meeting in May between the French representatives and the future Prime Minister.

Fourth Letter

In this letter dated July 12, Fletcher was still answering Delhi's communication dated June 4, 1947. Due to the remoteness of the hill station where the Consul was staying, the letters sent by Fletcher took a long time to reach Delhi as they had to transit through his Office in Pondicherry.

The main topic of this letter was again the possibility of the Communists coming to power in Pondicherry in case the scheme prepared by Baron to grant full internal autonomy to the French Settlements became a reality. For Fletcher: *"it would mean that control would pass to the Communists, who are in a majority in the Representative Assembly."* Baron did not agree as he felt that they were *"not really in a majority."* Fletcher could not accept his argument and pointed out that it was the members of the Representative Assembly who had elected V.

Subbiah, a Communist leader, as one of the two representatives of French India to the *Conseil de la République [Sénat]*.

We have to digress for a moment to mention that in France, a left-wing government had been in place soon after the end World War II. In French India, a similar arrangement existed under the *Front national démocratique*⁴⁰ (F.N.D.) which grouped under its umbrella the Communists, the Socialists and other small left Parties.

During the first months of 1947, some divergences appeared in the Front in France when the Communists refused to vote in the military budget for Indochina and did not accept to remove the parliamentary immunity for some Madagascar deputies who had participated in riots against the French government. The Communists also supported the striking workers against a decision of the government to fix salaries.

Finally on May 5, the Communists decided to leave the Cabinet; it was the end of the leftist entente. French India's politics followed the same evolution and a split

⁴⁰ National Democratic Front.

progressively appeared between the members of the Front.

Many were not ready to follow the radical Subbiah who was openly in favour of the Viet-Minh and who constantly denounced French and British imperialism. Most of the moderate politicians did not support a brutal break with France and a merger with the immense Indian subcontinent (as well as into the Madras province). During the month of July, the split became official when Lambert Saravane and Édouard Goubert set up the French India Socialist Party. It was the beginning of an intense power struggle between the Communists and the new Party supported by the Governor.⁴¹

The only way out for Baron was to support the Socialist Party which could counter balance Subbiah's power. His plan was to 'attract' the present members and supporters of the Communists towards a moderate outfit which would support the reforms proposed by Baron (and notified by Paris).

Though Fletcher agreed that this could be an alternative, he did not share the optimism of Baron: it was not an easy affair to counter the Communist influence. Fletcher quoted Baron as saying that in the new scheme, the Governor would be provided with very wide powers. The British Consul thought that this would not match the logic of the proposed reforms. If the French Governor kept 'wide powers', it could hardly be equivalent to the Dominion status offered by the British to an independent India.

Baron believed that it was vital for the Governor to be the Head of the Government, even if all the heads of departments were Indians, as the new entrants might have no experience in running a government.

Though Fletcher was certainly right that the status offered to India could not be equated to the one proposed by Baron for French India, however the fact

⁴¹ In August, the Socialist Party and its allies in Pondicherry with a majority in the Representative Assembly would support the French Administration and approve the new reforms. A telegram sent to the Prime Minister Paul Ramadier and the Overseas Minister Marius Moutet stated: "*The Representative Assembly now in session, would like to request you to convey to the government, the expression of the gratitude of the population for the reforms granted to French India which desired to govern itself freely and democratically, in collaboration with the Commissar of the Republic and to insure the well-being of its citizens in collaboration with France.*"

remains that after India's independence, Mountbatten remained till June 1948, not only as the Governor General of India⁴², but also the Chairman of the Defense Council. In this double-roled capacity he handled the Kashmir issue in such a partisan manner that it remains unsolved 55 years later.⁴³

In the same letter, Fletcher informs the Ministry officials in Delhi of the latest political development in Chandernagore and Pondicherry. Once again it is linked with the Communists: *"An interesting development has just taken place in Pondicherry. The French India National Congress is organizing a conference on the 29th and 30th of this month at which the principal item on the agenda is to be the independence of French India and the departure of the French. Kali Charan Ghose, the leading Communist in Chandernagore, has arrived in Pondicherry to lead the Communist Party in the absence of Subbiah in France. It appears that all the various political organizations in Chandernagore such as the National Democratic Front, Communists, Congress, Congress Socialists, Forward Bloc, Hindu Mahasabha, national Unity, together with the Muslim organization, trade unions and students' organizations have combined to form a United Front in order to secure the freedom of French India and the departure of the French."* Before the Conference in Pondicherry, the Communist Party of French India distributed a leaflet in the French territory urging a similar United Front in Pondicherry.

The Communist Party not only welcomed the Conference to be convened soon by the French India National Congress but also suggested it be enlarged to an All Parties Conference. Referring to the departure of the British, the Communist Party blamed the British for dividing the sub-continent.

The leaflet went on to declare that the people of French India could no longer tolerate French rule and suggested the establishment of an All Parties Union in every commune of the French Establishments which would decide on common actions and at a later stage could assume power under the umbrella of a central organization. The demands of the Communists were that the 'French Imperialists'

⁴² Mohammed Ali Jinnah became Pakistan's Governor General.

⁴³ See Dasgupta, op. cit..

should forthwith announce the date of their departure from Indian soil and the existing Representative Assembly immediately be converted into a 'Sovereign Constituent Assembly'.

Fletcher gave his comments on the above leaflet' which seems to corroborate his fear of a Communist take over as expressed in the previous letters.

The Communists led by Subbiah and Kali Charan Bose in Chandernagore wanted the French Settlements to merge with the Indian Dominion; they were not at all interested by an autonomy scheme.

One of the first gestures of Paris which finally felt the Indian heat mounting was the June 30 *Décret* [Decree] which gave a great autonomy to Chandernagore. The other Establishments were supposed to be granted the same status soon after. Chandernagore was tackled first because, as we saw earlier, it was practically a lost case. Two days earlier, Baron had pointed out to the Overseas Ministry that Bazin, the Administrator of Chandernagore was a worried man. The British Governor of Bengal and all his colleagues would be leaving Bengal on August 16. It would be difficult for the French officials to survive in the midst of a new-independent administration. Not only would the position of Bazin and other French officials would become risky without any material and moral support, but also their families would be endangered. The dignity of the French flag could be threatened on the French National Day (July 14).

He suggested that France immediately transfer its power and responsibility to a local Assembly and the Administrator become only the adviser of the local autonomous government.

The June 30 *Décret* was far below the expectations of the population of Chandernagore. Paris only granted administrative and financial autonomy. An all-party council, the Liberation Council was formed with the Mayor of Chandernagore as its President.

On 13 July 1947, Arun Chandra Datta, the President of the Liberation Council presented a resolution which was unanimously adopted. It rejected the *Décret*. The next day, the resolution was made public on the occasion of Bastille Day. The resolution wanted the French rule in Chandemagore to end on August 14. A

telegram even was sent to Marius Moutet requesting full autonomy for Chandernagore and the right of the people of Chandernagore to join the Indian Union.

The telegram also informed the Minister that the people of Chandernagore would hoist the Indian flag on the French Residency on 15 August. Poor Bazin, his seat was getting uncomfortably hot.

In Delhi the position of the Indian government was not so radical. Nehru sent a Message on the occasion of July 14, the French National Day to the French Chargé d’Affaire: *“I have great pleasure in conveying to you and through you to your Government the greetings of the Government and the people of India on this day of your national rejoicing. As India approaches her freedom and independence, July 14 gains a new meaning for her people. Both France and India are symbols of human values and I have every hope that in the years to come there will be the closest friendship and cooperation between them.”*

Three weeks later, Henri Roux, the French Charge d’Affaire called on Nehru to convey an urgent message from George Bidault.⁴⁴

With the date of India’s independence fast approaching, more and more excitement and sometimes even violence was witnessed in the French Settlements, especially in Chandernagore which was practically in a state of insurrection against the French administration.

Nehru recorded: *“He [Roux] told me that the French Government was somewhat exercised about developments in Pondicherry and Chandernagore, more especially the latter place. There was an agitation going on there to do something aggressive on August 15th. He very much hoped that untoward incidents will be avoided, as these will add to the difficulties of the situation.”*

As Baron had explained several times, the French Government was *“actively and urgently considering the future of the French possessions in India.”*

⁴⁴ Note, 8 August 1947. External Affairs Department File No. 26(26)-X/47, pp.13-14, National Archives of India.

But Paris could not act under threat or in a panicky manner. There were constitutional arrangements involved and any change had to remain within the framework of the French law.

Roux assured Nehru that in order to show the French Government's willingness to find a solution acceptable to both nations, Paris had *"decided to handover almost immediately the French loges to the Government of India without any further argument."*

It was what Nehru had requested as a first step in April 1947.

The Chargé d'Affaires informed the Indian government that Paris had *"decided to grant extensive financial and administrative powers to the municipalities in the French possession in India. These municipalities would thus have a great deal of autonomy in the future. Further the French Government itself was going to have elected members to the Councils in Pondicherry, Chandernagore, etc."*

This was more or less in line with what Baron had told Fletcher, though it is true that the new autonomy conferred to the municipalities was still far from the independence that India would be granting a week later.

Roux further told the soon-to-be Prime Minister of India, that Paris looked at these changes as the beginning of larger reforms. The French government *"proposed to take other and more far-reaching steps in the near future"* said Roux, though he *"could not indicate their exact nature at the present moment"*.

George Bidault wanted to assure India that it was his government's *"desire that all these matters should be settled amicably between the French Government and the Government of India and in accordance with the wishes of the people in French India."* Roux added that he *"felt sure that the final decisions would be in accord with the wishes of the people in the French Establishments and the Government of India."*

He however clarified that due to the parliamentary procedure, Paris could not make any official declaration at this point in time. Even if the French Government

could not 'publicize' to the other steps they were taking, they wanted it to be known that the loges would soon be handed over 'for free'.⁴⁵

Nehru wanted to get something in writing from the French Chargé d'Affaires: "so that there might be no misunderstanding". Roux answered that he would request his government to "give the precise formula". Once more he was keen that "publicity should be given to the question of the loges as early as possible, as he hoped that this might have a good effect in India."

Nehru informed Roux that his Government also desired to solve all the issues relating to the French possessions in a friendly manner. Furthermore, he wanted the wishes of the people of the French Settlements to be respected.

Regarding the agitation in Chandernagore⁴⁶, Nehru told Roux that "it is very difficult, and indeed hardly possible, for us to do anything in the matter."

There were many groups and political parties in Bengal and the Government of India could not control them. He even added that the Indian government itself had "plenty of trouble in some parts of Bengal", especially in the coal and steel belts.

Nehru pointed out that even the "so-called Congress group" in Chandernagore was not organizationally connected with the Indian National Congress. Of course, this was not completely true. When a few days later, Baron met Gandhi and got from him the promise that the local Congress would not take law into their own hands, the Chandernagore leaders had no choice but to comply.

Nehru reiterated that the Chandernagore leaders used the name of Congress, but were an independent group. The only link was that they had some sympathy for the National Congress' ideals, he said. Roux was nevertheless assured that

⁴⁵ Though as we have already pointed out, this was legally incorrect, as any part or parcel of French territory could not be ceded without the consent of the French Parliament and the population concerned.

⁴⁶ Kamal Prosad Ghosh, the mayor of Chandernagore, declared on 4 August that "Chandernagore forms an integral part of Bengal and has every right to break its links with imperialist France." A general strike had been threatened and a hartal proclaimed but withdrawn after the release of about 100 persons who had been arrested.

as far as the Government of India was concerned, nobody wanted *“any untoward happenings in Chandernagore or Pondicherry.”*

When the Chargé d’Affaires pointed out that there were reports that some leaders wanted to haul down the French flag in Chandernagore and that it would create a bad impression in France, Nehru immediately agreed. He assured Roux that India *“would not like any disrespect to be shown to the French flag”*.

In the minutes of the meeting, Nehru commented: *“It was not clear to me however what I could do in the matter, except possibly to give private advice to some private individuals.”*

Nehru’s idea was to inform the leaders in Chandernagore that the French Government was keen to settle the matter in accordance with the wishes of the people. That was the reason why he had asked Roux, for an undertaking in writing *“lest there should be some misunderstanding in the future”*.

Fifth letter

Independence Day was approaching for India. Fletcher’s recess had ended and he was back in Pondicherry to attend the functions marking this special day. As the previous ones, this letter is addressed to Atta-ur-Rahman; it is dated 14 August 1947. Technically it should have been the last, as a British Consul was not supposed to deal directly with the Government of India after India’s independence. However, we shall see that it was not.

Fletcher reports about another meeting with Baron who was just back from Calcutta where he had done some follow up on Roux’ meeting with Nehru. The Governor had flown to Calcutta to try to convince Gandhi that the French Government was sincere in its approach and events should take a legal and constitutional course: a solution could be found without taking to the streets or using violence.

Baron reported to Fletcher about his meeting with Mahatma Gandhi who advised the political parties of Chandarnagore not to take the law into their own hands.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ The Hindu reported on August 14 the message given by Gandhi during the prayer meeting on August 12: *“On that day [August 15] the Indians in the French possessions and Portuguese*

They had no choice but to wait for the new constitution [reforms] proposed by Paris.

Baron added that *“the Mahatma had been of great assistance⁴⁸ to him in advising the Chandernagore leaders not to embark on precipitate action”*.

When the Consul asked Baron about the decision of the French Government about the fate of French India, Baron said that on August 15, he would be inviting local political leaders to meet him.

He wanted to inform them that Paris had decided that the population of French India would be allowed to express their wishes either by a referendum or through the Representative Assembly. However, this could not be done until the Union of India had become a “sovereign State”.

As in an earlier discussion, Fletcher did not agree that the Indian Dominion would not become ‘sovereign’ on August 15 (the next day). The Consul’s point was that a State can be sovereign and at the same time remain within the British Commonwealth and under the British Crown.⁴⁹

He pointed out to the French Governor that a Dominion is a sovereign state with full control over its own destiny. Further, it has the power to enter into treaties and at any time to leave the Commonwealth. Fletcher quoted the case of the Union of South Africa and its position over the former German South West Africa.

possessions were to declare their freedom from France and Portugal. That he held would be a thoughtless act. It would be a sign, perhaps of arrogance. The British were retiring, not the French and the Portuguesese. He undoubtedly held the view that the Indians in these possessions were bound to merge in Independent India in good time. Only the Indians in those territories should not take the law in their own hands.”

Gandhi’s message was mainly based on the fact that India had too many problems to deal with at that time and he added: *“Frenchmen are highly cultured people. They will leave India after some time following the implementation of the political reform.”*

⁴⁸ In his speech at the prayer meeting on August 17, Gandhi expressed his disagreement with *satyagrahis* of the Chandernagore Congress, he even called them ‘*duragrahis*’ (stubborn).

⁴⁹ It is to be pointed out that in the Instrument of Accession signed by the rajas of the Princely States, the accession to the Union of India is on three subjects only: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Communications.

He told Baron that it would be unfortunate if the Governor of French India would give the impression that he did not consider India a free nation.

As we have only the British report of the discussion, it is difficult to make out what was really Baron's intention. It is also possible that the Governor, knowing that his words would be reported to Delhi, tried to send his own message.

Baron reiterated that he considered that until the Union of India had its own constitution, it was impossible for French India to join the Indian Union. He added, according to Fletcher, that the next day he would make a statement in this sense for its 'psychological effect'.

Fletcher retorted that *"the effect in some quarters might perhaps be rather unfortunate"*. He was most probably thinking of Delhi. The Consul believed more and more that the French were merely playing for time; they were not ready to let their territory become a part of the British Commonwealth. He added that the French would be "damned if they will let it happened".

He informed Atta-ur-Rahman that Baron still considered that chaos would follow independence and that the population of French India would prefer to remain within the French Union though in the process.

Fletcher was not convinced on either point: first he believed that even if there were clashes in the North for some time, the communal trouble would not spread to the South which would certainly remain quiet. As for the other argument about the impossibility of French India joining the Indian Union because of its membership in the Commonwealth, if the population wanted it so, why should it not be acceptable? Fletcher reiterated to Baron that according to him, a large majority of the people wanted the merger with India.

Finally, Baron escaped further discussion on the subject by telling the British Consul that in any case the matter would be dealt with through the French Ambassador. In future he would only be an Administrator. He also remarked that his Government always moved slowly and that if a decision had been taken six months earlier (to bring the reforms introduced now), "things would have been [today] very different." The French Governor remarked that in any case if the

Union of India chooses to exercise economic pressure on the Establishments French India could not survive.

The British Consul then briefed Delhi on the latest 'reforms' introduced by the French Government for Pondicherry: *"The present Government Council is to be enlarged and will consist of himself as President with the right to vote, and six members, of whom three are to be officials – he called them technical experts – and three elected."*

Three days after the meeting between Nehru and Roux on August 12, a new décret had been promulgated. The décret of April 1947, officializing the Government Council (*Conseil de gouvernement*), was abrogated. This new décret was a step towards the announced autonomy, but Paris was still very reticent to introduce deeper changes in the status of its colonies: three elected and three nominated members with the Governor having a right of veto did not mean much to a population which would soon have a free India as an example to emulate, thought Fletcher.

The Council was however responsible to follow up on the decisions of the Representative Assembly. It was supposed to become *"the real government of the French Establishment in India for all local matters."*

A few days later, in another radical change the post of Governor was abrogated, Baron became the first Commissar of the Republic.

The newly-designed Council has the power to discuss the orders of the Commissar except those for law and order and justice.

A Department whose budget fully depended on local revenues could be attributed to one of the Counsellors who were to receive the technical support of the French official responsible for such a Department. The other Establishments were to have a municipal assembly on the lines of the one formed for Chandernagore.

Baron tried to convince the Consul that *"the entire administration would be in the hands of the people."* His argument was not turned down by Fletcher: the powers and functions of the Chandernagore Municipal Assembly were limited and the elected members of the Government Council were in a technical minority.

Another minor change was that the French European officials would be paid by the French Government and not anymore from the budget of French India. It was a small change that corresponded to an old grievance of the population.

Fletcher announced to Baron that he would be relieved at the end of the month. He would be replaced by an Indian officer.⁵⁰ Though the Governor expressed his hope that Fletcher's successor would be someone who had been to France, spoke the language and appreciated French culture, it was not to be the case as we shall soon see.

Fletcher felt that the reforms claimed by the French as 'local autonomy' were far from the independence offered to India. He believed the population was likely to be very unsatisfied.

Fletcher could certainly not see all the implications of his comments. He was probably 'locally' true, but there was a larger picture that Paris had to take into account. First, the case of Pondicherry could create a precedent for the other French Overseas Territories, particularly Indo-China. Then, the French government was extremely unstable during the Fourth Republic and any bold decision could have precipitated a fall of the Council of Ministers, as it regularly happened for other cases. In fact, one would have to wait till July 1954 and the Geneva Agreement on Indo-China for France to find an opening [un créneau] for a solution.

The British Consul still believed that Paris waited for the conditions in India to deteriorate enough so that the French population would no longer be interested in joining the Union of India.

Baron, according to Fletcher, expressed his surprise for "*sudden agitation for immediate merger*". Politically, apart from the 'reforms', the Consul informed Delhi that he believed that the Governor would play the card of the newly formed Socialist party. Its members were supported and funded by the French government in the hope of breaking up the Communist Party and the local Congress which were in favour of an immediate merger with India. Already some clashes between the supporters of each camp had been reported.

⁵⁰ Rashid Ali Baig.

Fletcher was informed of some troubles in Karaikal which erupted after a procession was banned by the police. It is said that five policemen and four demonstrators were injured. Since the beginning of August, Pondicherry had been quiet, though several small demonstrations had occurred. The protestors were *'parading the streets morning and evening shouting slogans'* as the French Administration had not enforced any ban on such processions.

Delhi was also informed that the Mayors of the eight communes of Pondicherry had issued a statement announcing their desire for a merger with India. They also wanted to hoist the Union flag on municipal buildings in the French territories on August 15.

As we have seen earlier, Subbiah left for Delhi to meet Nehru just before August 15. According to Fletcher, he wanted to ask the Government of India to denounce the validity of the treaty of 1814 between England and France.⁵¹

Fletcher who had often encouraged the pro-merger elements had given him (for a day) his copy of the treaty. However, the Consul advised a peaceful solution of the issue: *"Anything which will keep local political leaders' minds turned away from violence and towards legal discussion is to be welcomed."* He believed that *"many subjects of the Union of India are likely to suffer"* in case violence erupts.

Sixth Letter

A momentous change occurred on the sub-continent between the fifth letter in the series under study and the next. India became independent. Nehru as the first Prime Minister pronounced these words which have remained famous in history:

Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance. It is

⁵¹ By which the French Establishments in India were restored to the French.

fitting that at this solemn moment we take the pledge of dedication to the service of India and her people and to the still larger cause of humanity.

For our Consul General, the stroke of midnight did not change anything. Though technically he was not supposed to have direct relations with the Government of India anymore, he continued to write to the Indian officials in Delhi. His correspondence was not even renumbered. His Secret Letter dated August 17, 1947 bears the reference D.O. No. 176-II/14. It is in fact only the continuation of the previous letter (dated August 14, 1947) under reference D.O. No. 175-II/14. In a strange diplomatic twist, he remained the Agent of British India which did not exist any more. Fletcher's letter contains a translation of an 'official précis' of the speech of Governor Baron delivered on the August 15, 1947 to the heads of departments of the French India Administration as well as leading notables and leaders of political parties. During his speech, Baron pledged on behalf of his Government to respect the wishes of the people on two conditions: first that the Union of India should have its own Constitution and that it be a fully sovereign State.

On the 15th evening, the British Consul General held a reception at his Consulate to which more than a hundred people were invited. Amongst these were Baron, French officials and the leading political leaders as well as members of the British and Indian communities. Fletcher made a short speech; he proposed a toast to *"the happiness and prosperity of the Union of India and Pakistan and to their peoples and their continued friendship with Britain"*.

Fletcher took the opportunity to quote Lord Mountbatten's speech at Karachi on the August 14⁵². The Governor-General had referred to "two new sovereign States" becoming members of the Commonwealth. The Consul General to counter Baron explained to his audience that the Commonwealth was an association of free sovereign states. They were only linked together *"by common interests with the Crown as a symbol."* He clarified that each Member State of the Commonwealth was entirely independent and sovereign; it was free to sign its own treaties; a Member State was not bound to declare war to a third nation,

⁵² Pakistan had become independent on August 14.

should Britain do so; and it was free to frame its own fiscal and economic policies. He also added that any Commonwealth State was at any moment completely free to leave the Commonwealth, if it wished so. This was the most important point to be remembered, he emphasized. What the British had offered India and Pakistan was complete independence.

He regretted that India should now be divided, though he hoped that the two parts would come together 'before long'. Finally he reaffirmed that the British policy's goal had always been India's complete autonomy. The only disagreement between London and the Indian leaders had been over the rate of progress towards that goal. He concluded that on that day no one could any longer doubt the sincere intentions of the British.

Fletcher said that he had purposely made these remarks on sovereignty to contradict Baron's morning speech and *"to remove any misapprehension Barons's remarks might have created"*. He still believed that the French were playing for time and wanted to remain in India: *"Why else should they spend so much money on a territory which has only a sentimental value for them?"*

The same question could have been asked to the British who fought against India's freedom movement for several decades before accepting to leave the sub-continent.

Fletcher reiterated that Paris feared repercussions for its other colonies (it was certainly true) and was keeping a foothold in India in case troubles developed. This question was: if these Settlements were only of sentimental value for France, why should they spend so much energy and resources to stay on? The point so often repeated by Fletcher, that Baron believed in a disintegration of India, never appears in the French archives. In fact, since 1946 Baron had always pleaded with Paris to give French India, the largest possible autonomy. Fletcher's conclusions were that only merger with India could satisfy the local population and that they *"will not be put off by quibbling about constitution and sovereignty."*

The British Consul remarked that the Archbishop of Pondicherry told him that he wished France was capable of making a gesture similar to the one made by the

British. Another French official, Raboul who accompanied Baron to Paris, described by Fletcher as an intelligent and sensible young man, also thought that French India should merge with the Union of India. Raboul is supposed to have added that it was however unfortunate that the other departments including the Colonial Ministry, did not see the things in this light.

The Consul believed that most of the French were thinking that way. He added: *“The French are a proud race and the average Frenchman would rather that his country left in a dignified manner than be compelled to go.”*

There is a lot of underlying bitterness in Fletcher’s words. The British were leaving (or had left) and the French were hanging on.

He informed Delhi that he had been told that the loges would be retroceded on the September 1. He ironically commented: *“The graciousness of the gesture is somewhat impaired by the fact that the French are really giving back something over which their claims to sovereignty have never been recognized.”*

The day after the Independence several private functions were held in Pondicherry. Fletcher reported the details to Delhi. One amusing fact was that the French Government flew the flags of the Union of India and Pakistan.⁵³

⁵³ This did not amuse the Indian government for long: the Indian Consul General would soon complain to the Centre about what he perceived as a mischievous action. He wrote to Delhi: *“Since August 15, it is the practice of the French to fly the Tricolor together with the flags of the Indian Union and of Pakistan on all government buildings every day. In my opinion this practice has certain objectionable features. In the first place, the impression created on the public is that India has been divided into two new Dominions. I believe this practice is carried out in order deliberately to create this impression since the French are very happy over the communal situation according to my information from Lt.-Col. Fletcher, Mr. Marsland, some inmates of the Ashram and others. The relations between India and Pakistan are the same as the relations between India and Australia, Canada or any other Dominion and if the French fly the Pakistan flag they might as well fly the other Dominion flags as well. But to fly the Pakistan flag alone together with the Indian flag is, I believe, mischievous and intended to confuse. I also object to the flying of the Indian Flag even by itself beside the Tricolor. This practice is to give force to the “dual nationality” theory under which the French hope to remain in India.”*

That day, the public buildings and the government House were illuminated. The British Consul said that he himself *“put a good display of flags on the well illuminated Consulate.”* It probably means that the Pakistan flag was also hoisted. For this he received the help of the Electrical Engineer of the French Public Works Department, who participated *“whole-heartedly into the arrangements”*. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram also participated. They provided flour and bread free of cost for the refreshments *“as there is a famine of these commodities here”*. Later, Fletcher wrote officially to the Ashram to thank them and say that he considered it *“a gift to the Union of India”*.

It is necessary to clarify here the position of Sri Aurobindo and his Ashram. Sri Aurobindo, who had been the first Indian leader to advocate *purna swaraj* (or complete independence) from the British in the early years of the 20th Century, had taken refuge in Pondicherry for his personal sadhana. However, he kept in close touch with the political development of India’s political struggle. The best proof is his intervention when Sir Stafford Cripps visited India in 1942 with a proposal to give Dominion status to India. Sri Aurobindo thought it should immediately be accepted by the Congress leaders. Unfortunately, it was not to be so!

Sri Aurobindo always believed that Pondicherry was to return to the fold of Mother India, though he hoped the French could leave behind them a cultural institution such as a university to manifest *“the window of French culture”* mentioned by Nehru in 1946. We have already seen the stiff British opposition to the scheme who politicized the issue to serve their personal agenda.

August 15 was also Sri Aurobindo’s birthday. On the occasion, he published a message about five dreams he had for Mother India:

The French propaganda line and policy is apparently to give the local population the impression that for all intents and purposes Pondicherry is already a part of India and the small vestige of French sovereignty is not worth bothering about. Thus they hope to lull the public into inaction and acceptance of the present situation.”

The first of these dreams was a revolutionary movement which would create a free and united India. India today is free but she has not achieved unity...

Another dream was for the resurgence and liberation of the peoples of Asia and her return to her great role in the progress of human civilisation...

The third dream was a world-union forming the outer basis of a fairer, brighter and nobler life for all mankind...

Another dream, the spiritual gift of India to the world has already begun. India's spirituality is entering Europe and America in an ever increasing measure....

The final dream was a step in evolution which would raise man to a higher and larger consciousness and begin the solution of the problems which have perplexed and vexed him since he first began to think and to dream of individual perfection and a perfect society.

It has often been alleged that the Mother was a 'colonialist' for the simple reason that her brother Matheo Alfassa was a senior official in the Ministry of Colonies⁵⁴, but nothing is further from the truth. When in early 1948, P.A. Menon, the Joint Secretary in-charge of Pondicherry⁵⁵ came on a fact-finding mission, he had a long interview with the Mother who first refused to speak about 'politics'. Finally, when she was pressed to give her opinion, Menon was quite flabbergasted to hear that she thought that the French should leave ALL their colonies, including Vietnam. He had been receiving erroneous reports (most of the time bazar gossip) from his officials (particularly the first Indian Consul General) to the contrary.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ He was at one point in time, the Governor of Congo.

⁵⁵ The boss of Major Atta-ur-Rahman.

⁵⁶ On June 14, 1949, a few days before the Referendum in Chandernagore, Nolini Kanta Gupta told a an A.P.I. (Associated Press of India) correspondent: "*Sri Aurobindo feels certain and has expressed it more than once that the different parts of India, whoever may be their present rulers, are bound to join the mother country and that India, free and united, will become a dynamic spiritual force bringing peace and harmony to the war-scarred and suffering humanity in general.*"

To come back to the Independence celebrations, Fletcher informed Delhi that many flags of the Union of India were flown in the town. Morning and evening processions were organised. In the evening, a demonstration jointly organized by the Congress and Communist parties counted a large number of women; the participants sang Indian patriotic songs and shouted slogans in honour of Nehru and other leaders. Some banners called the French “Imperialists” and asked them to leave India: *“White man, get out”*.

Fletcher reported that he had heard *“rumours of a clash between the Socialists and some passers-by and that some of the Ashram buildings were stoned.”* He even said that one unconfirmed report mentioned that one member of the Ashram⁵⁷ had died as a result of injury inflicted by a stone.⁵⁸

We have seen that Roux had informed Nehru of the decision of the French Government to hand over the loges on September 1. A letter to this effect was sent by the French Prime Minister (*Président du Conseil*) to his Indian counterpart on August 12. For some reason, the letter of George Bidault⁵⁹ was

When asked if this meant that Sri Aurobindo desired Chandernagore, Pondicherry and the other settlements in India to join India, Nolini said: *“Certainly so. He has prophesied that these small foreign pockets in India would sooner or later become one with India and India would become the spiritual leader of the world.”*

⁵⁷ The person who was murdered was a man called Mulshankar. He had come to the Ashram in the thirties and was also one of the attendants of Sri Aurobindo. Apparently that day, Mulshankar was stabbed in the neck, though no one actually witnessed the stabbing. He was bleeding profusely when he reached the Ashram main door, and he could not be saved.

⁵⁸ The recently-posted Indian Consul General, Rashid Ali Baig reported to Delhi: *“The hostile demonstrations, culminating in the murder of an inmate, that took place on August 15 at the gates of the Ashram were directed against her [The Mother] and not against Shri Aurobindo whom everybody seems to respect but pities for being ‘hen-pecked’ without the benefit of the matrimony.”* Nothing was further from the truth, but Baig’s reports continued to feed the gossip mill. This was one of the first in a series of outrageous reports which Baig poured on Delhi. Finally he was reprimanded more than once by Nehru himself who had to remind him that he was the Consul General of India.

⁵⁹ File No.26(46)-X/47, M.E.A. & C.R., N.A.I.

misplaced and received by Nehru only on September 22. This delay is rather strange in view of the importance of the content.

The French said later that they had misplaced the letter; in any case the fate of the French Settlements was not the No. 1 priority of Delhi when North India was burning.

Nehru answered Bidault on 30 September 1947: *“The Government of India welcome and accept the decision of the Government of the French Republic regarding the renunciation of the historic rights which France has exercised in the areas known as the French loges in India, in favour of the Dominion of India. Owing to the late receipt of your letter, it was not possible for the ceremony of the transfer to be held on the date you proposed. I am, however, arranging with your Embassy here for a convenient date in the immediate future.”*

Nehru, who had asked Paris for this first gesture of goodwill as early as April, expressed *“on behalf of the Government of India my sincere appreciation of this friendly gesture which will help to strengthen the cordial relations existing between the Governments of the French Republic and India.”*

Finally, the loges were formally ceded to the Indian Union on 6 October 1947.

It has to be pointed out that this cession was not entirely according to the French law by which the Government could not take such a decision without the assent of the Parliament. But as we have seen, it was more a symbolic gesture to put the relations between the two countries on a firmer base.

Seventh Letter

The last letter of our study is addressed by the British Consul to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations. It is dated September 17, 1947.

In this letter, Fletcher refers to a secret letter (Ref. D.O.No.201-II/14, dated the September 13, 1947). Though Fletcher was not supposed to be working anymore for the Indian Government, he continued to inform Delhi of the happenings in Pondicherry. This was strange as an Indian Consul General of India was posted in the French Colony.

The letter contains some portions of a speech Baron gave on the September 15 on the occasion of the opening of the session of the Representative Assembly. The portions translated deal with political matters. Fletcher says that it got a good reception. Later, the Assembly even decided to send a telegram to the French Prime Minister to thank him for the reforms and express its desire to collaborate with Baron⁶⁰ for attaining freedom and democratic self-government while keeping its connection with France.

Subbiah, the French Senator and Communist leader did not attend the session. He had informed the Governor that he was *“afraid to do so in view of the terrorism reigning in Pondicherry”*.⁶¹

Fletcher, who for the last two months had been warning Delhi of the great danger of Communism, had now to admit that *“the town has been quiet since the beginning of the month owing to the action taken by the authorities against Communist agitators.”*

Subbiah was no longer as popular as he had been a few months ago: *“The general strike in the mills which Subbiah called for the September 1 has been a failure. The French mill closed for a day or two, ostensibly owing to shortage of labour... The other two mills remained open. In the Anglo-French Textile Company’s mill about 200 to 400 workers failed to turn up for a few days and there was some absenteeism in the smallest Mudaliarpet mill. This was due chiefly to Communist propaganda to the effect that the Socialists had planned to way lay and attack workers on their way to and from work and molest their woman folk at home.”* That was all. Perhaps the very serious disturbances and riots in North India had cooled tempers in the South. Also, as Fletcher pointed out: *“Subbiah’s influence and prestige have very much declined; in fact he is about finished as a political leader.”* It is rather strange that the Senator was the only French leader who was received by the Indian Prime Minister soon **after Independence (August 13)**. **The only conclusion that we can draw, is that the**

⁶⁰ Now, Commissar of the Republic.

⁶¹ The terrorism was mainly the work of the Communist party workers. Subbiah was afraid of the backlash.

situation was in flux. Political leaders were ready at any time to change party and stance according to the wind and the benefits they could obtain, while the population did not know where their future lay.

Fletcher analyzed the situation thus: *“As you may have seen in the papers Subbiah and others have been pouring out streams of complaints about terrorism and repression. It is true that there were attacks on Communists last month but these were largely due to long suppressed resentment against the Communists for their high-handedness and acts of violence when they were given a free hand by Baron.”*

As we have noted earlier Baron was backing the Socialists Party and there is no doubt that secret funds were generously distributed to purchase new sympathies. According to Fletcher, the Secretary General of the Government, Pacha who had been acting Governor while Baron was in France, had been recalled for being ‘too Leftist’. A Socialist was to replace him. The Director of Public Instruction was to meet a similar fate: he was too inclined to support the Communists.

Another factor that played a role in cooling the situation was the fact that taxes were lighter in the French Establishments than in neighbouring India. The population knew this, so did Baron and the French government who used it in their propaganda. Once Independence Day passed, the Governor often mentioned to interlocutors that there were now good chances that the population of French India would decide to stay within the French Union (provided they were given complete autonomy).

In a speech to the Assembly, Baron said that the inhabitants of Balasore (one of the loges in Orissa), though Indian nationals, had petitioned the Administrator of Chandernagore against the cession of the loge: they would have to pay heavier taxes under the Indian administration. Fletcher said that he *“expected the inhabitants of the Masulipatam and Calicut loges will follow suit as for years now they have paid no taxes to anyone.”* It was not to happen as in fact the loges had already been ceded by Paris on September 1. Probably, the British Consul General had not been informed.

No doubt that at this particular moment, Baron was trying to play for time at least *“until the situation in India became clearer”*. He told the Consul that *“he was well aware that it was the policy of the Government of India to secure the departure of the French”* He admitted that he considered this “quite natural”.

The recent events in Delhi, Punjab, Mysore and Hyderabad and the food situation in South India had made many people rethink the merger. For many the conclusion was that it was *“better to accept the proposed reforms and stay in the French Union”* for the moment.

We have to remember that even if the will had been present, the French Government needed time to sort out the legalities of a referendum or even a parliamentary solution.

Fletcher also pointed out the economic factor which was very crucial. For example the textile mills which were the main source of employment and revenue in Pondicherry: *“if they have to pay Indian rates of taxation it will be difficult for them to carry on and they may lose their French colonial markets.”*

Baron had already organized awareness programs on the subject with the help of the Socialist party. The idea was to frighten the workers by bringing insecurity in their minds with the prospect that they would lose their jobs with the closure of the mills. There was certainly a serious possibility that many of the advantages of French India would disappear once the Establishments merged with the Union of India.

The arguments of Baron (which were probably those of his ministry) were repeated by Lambert Saravane, the Socialist Deputy of Pondicherry who had, like Baron, often insinuated that India was still not really free, but remained under the British Crown. Saravane had pointed out that the legal and administrative British machinery was *“designed to maintain the Imperialist hold on India”*.

Fletcher nastily commented: *“Saravane is a jackal of Baron and is chiefly actuated by a desire to hang on to his job of Deputy in the French Parliament as long as he can.”*

The two French Representatives (Saravane, the Deputy and Subbiah, the Senator) were now looking in opposite directions. The Communist leader never

missed a chance to attack Baron and denounce the hypocrisy of the French reforms, while Saravane defended them.

Finally, on August 28, though the popular pressure had slightly receded, France and India agreed to sign a Joint Declaration.

The Governments of India and France, equally desirous to strengthen and develop the bonds of friendship which unite their countries and anxious as regards all the questions pertaining to Indo-French relations to adjust their views as soon as possible and in a spirit of loyalty and mutual understanding, decided to examine jointly for a friendly settlement of problems in the French establishments in India taking into account at the same time aspirations and interests of the people, historical and cultural links which unite them to France as well as the evolution of India.

This declaration further cooled tempers and put the issue back on a constitutional track.

A month later, Maurice Schumann, the spokesperson of General de Gaulle during the War, came on an official mission to Pondicherry and Delhi. Years later, he remembered: *“India was only independent since a few days. I am just a Member of Parliament, not a Minister or a former Minister, but I am summoned by the Prime Minister Paul Ramadier at the Hotel Matignon⁶². Ramadier tells me (with the knowledge of Vincent Auriol, the President of the French Republic): “I want to ask you a service. As you know, we have five Establishments in India: Pondicherry, Chandernagore, Karikal, Yanaon and Mahé): it is the heritage of Dupleix. In 1815, the British ceded these territories to us. We have neither the right, nor the material possibility to assure the military defense of these territories. There are only a few gendarmes in each of the establishments. But France is passing through a difficult situation. The Constitution⁶³ has just been voted. What is in the balance is the French Union, we want to bring to an end direct administration, particularly there [Pondicherry], but we are dreaming of a French Commonwealth in which each member state would have its full independence*

⁶² Office cum Residence of the French Prime Ministers.

⁶³ The Constitution of the Fourth Republic.

and where the commons powers will only be delegated for the foreign affairs on one hand and for the defense on another. But we have a very serious problem with Indochina... even if the five cities in India have a special status and represent a limited case [vis-à-vis the autonomy], it would be highly desirable that they not disappear from our maps. We are counting on you to try to convince the Indians, we know that you are already in contact with Nehru and his daughter.”

This was Schumann’s road map. Unfortunately perhaps, his mission would only be partially successful.

Some conclusions

- **Fletcher’s letters and the role of the British**

The letters demonstrate clearly that the British Consul General did the footwork to ensure that for French India there would be no solution other than an unconditional departure of the French administration. At the same time, the British remained very much present in the first years of the Government of free-India. Lord Mountbatten was the Governor General; he stayed on as the head of State till June 1948 and India became a Republic with its own Constitution only 3 years later.

British officers continued to command the Indian and Pakistani Armies for several months. One of the best proofs of the influence of Fletcher’s letters at the highest level of the Indian bureaucracy is a small Note by Bajpai, the Secretary General of the Ministry of External Affairs, in response to a particularly nasty and derogatory (against the French) letter addressed to the ministry by Baig. In a very undiplomatic language⁶⁴, Baron and others were attacked by the Consul General:

We might tell the Consul General confidentially that we share his view of Mr. Baron and that Mr. Schumann’s reputation has

⁶⁴ Among other things, he wrote: “Now for Mr. Schumann. He is the President of the M.R.P. (Movement for the Republic) and through the war the official spokesman of General de Gaulle. General de Gaulle is credited with being a complete fascist who has not fought the Germans “to liquidate the Empire”. M. Schumann’s views and motives can therefore hardly be expected to be liberal.”

preceded him. The French are playing for time and hoping that we shall become enfeebled by internal disorders as to leave the French more strongly entrenched in the Settlements than in the past.

We are not going to be deceived by such transparent maneuvers, we already decided to ask Paris whether they mean business. Since the issue is now definitively on the highest planes, it is best to ignore Mr. Baron but to keep a vigilant eye on all that goes on in Pondicherry and keep us informed.

The Secretary General merely repeats the arguments of Fletcher. At the same time, we have to remember that Baron was himself reprimanded by his own ministry of being too 'Indian'. He would soon be recalled on this ground.⁶⁵

- **Role of Rashid Ali Baig**

The Indian Consul General played an important role to ensure that no negotiated solution could be found. His offensive reports and letters, insulting everyone would not create a favourable atmosphere for finding a solution where both nations would have been the winner. Baig had to be reprimanded several times and was finally recalled. Unfortunately, it was too late, the momentum had passed.

Fifty years later, one can still regret that Nehru chose such an officer to overview this delicate situation.

Over the years it became more and more difficult to come out of the entrenched positions and to find an honourable way out for France to return to India the suzerainty over the French Establishments. Only the wisdom and the determination of Pierre Mendès-France saved both nations from a longer and even more unpleasant conflict.

- **The French Position**

⁶⁵ He was also considered to be close to the Ashram.

We have seen that the main problem in France was the instability of the Governments during this period. Apart from the precariousness of the day to day life of the successive Cabinets, two ministries were sharing the Pondicherian burden. Their views and objectives were often in opposition.

A letter from a Frenchman who had lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram since the mid-twenties, is very telling in this context. The letter is interesting first because the author is not involved in either local or French politics; and he is also not a part with the French Establishment.

On July 22, Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire⁶⁶, a distinguished engineer graduated from the famous *École Polytechnique* wrote to his parents in France:

Our friend, Governor Baron is in Paris to convince the ministries of the urgency to grant to this country [the French Establishments] the autonomy that they are asking for. If it is not done, any future French influence in India will be ruined forever.

Unfortunately, people in France do not seem to understand the evolution of the world outside. There is no global vision about world problems; it appears that there is no reasoned and determined policy. There is a sort of pendulum movement between casualness and contemptuous bitterness. One takes back constantly with one hand what one gives with the other. We hope that we shall not make the same mistake than in Syria and Lebanon where we lost everything for wanting to gain everything.

It is very unfortunate that Paris continued to navigate behind the events for seven more years; it seems that the Overseas Ministry tried with mini-reforms (or 'management' of local politicians⁶⁷) to put off one fire after another. No one had a clear and determined vision of the future. One would have to wait for Mendès-France to catch the reins of the future, take a bold jump and work a way out of

⁶⁶ Known as 'Pavitra' in the Ashram.

⁶⁷ A very easy thing to do. One often does not realize that most of the politicians in Pondicherry, were at the same time 'patriots' (pro-India) and pro-French culture. They did not want the 'merger' to be a cultural 'immersion'. Most of them were keen to keep the French distinctiveness.

the impasse in July-August 1954⁶⁸.

A year later, Pavitra wrote again to his father. He was still hoping for an honorable exit:

In Pondicherry, the political situation is still not clear. One waits any day for the Joint Declaration of the French and Indian Government. The ideal solution would be that French India get back its full independence, enter the French Union with an autonomy as large as possible and substantial cultural links keep with France. It could be useful to both India and France. This should be the end result of an evolution started a year ago with various upheavals. France has committed so many mistakes that there few left to be done to loose everything. The Delhi government is very centralizing and Madras Province would like to absorb Pondicherry territory. The Ashram has become quite unpopular because we did not advocate the immediate merger which goes against the interests of the local population. We have been accused of being the agents of French imperialism (France, one must admit is not very popular in Asia). But all this is momentary, and I am still confident that a logical and honest solution will one day be achieved.

In one way, this letter resumed the complications of the situation: New Delhi had more burning issue to tackle, particularly the conflict in Kashmir, the terrible debates in the UN⁶⁹ as well as the food situation in India and number of other problems. The Madras Government, the British, the political parties of French India, each one had their own axe to grind and France did not want to create a precedent for her other colonies. Seven more years would pass before a solution was found.

⁶⁸ It was concretised by the de facto transfer on November 1, 1954.

⁶⁹ During the debates on Kashmir, the British, particularly Noel Baker, the Commonwealth Secretary, blatantly sided with Pakistan.

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